

Soldiers

Online

VENETO R

Story and Photos by Steve Harding

THE C-130s appeared as dark specks against the hazy blue of the afternoon sky. Within seconds, they were rumbling overhead, huge cargo parachutes blossoming beneath them as they passed over the drop zone. Even as the vehicles and heavy-equipment bundles hit the ground, another formation bored in, and moments later the air filled with paratroopers. Exercise Veneto Rescue 2000 was under way.

Held this summer in northern Italy, the complex operation involved the Vicenza-based U.S. Army Southern European Task Force's infantry brigade, elements of the Italian army's Folgore Brigade, and American and Italian transport and attack aircraft. Together they practiced one of the most challenging tasks modern armies face: a noncombatant evacuation operation, or NEO.

"We have a European Command requirement to be able to conduct short-notice NEOs anywhere in Europe or Africa," said outgoing SETAF commander MG Paul T. Mikolashek, "so Veneto Rescue is a very important exercise for us." One

of the first paratroopers to land, he was participating in a last exercise with his troops before leaving for his new post as commander of Third U.S. Army.

"We get one chance a year to train and rehearse this type of operation in a field environment," Mikolashek said, "though of course we do it at the staff level all the time. This exercise gives us the chance to hone our skills in a very sophisticated and challenging event that involves an airborne assault, rapid air-landing operation, air assaults out to remote sites to secure endangered 'noncombatants,' and then processing and evacuating them."

Reflecting actual, recent events in Africa, the exercise scenario was built around increasingly widespread factional fighting among three groups in the fictitious country of "Anglia." Mounting violence had isolated and endangered American and third-



ESCUVE



(Above) The preparation: An NCO calls out paratroopers' "stick" assignments during Veneto Rescue 2000 prejump training at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza.

(Background) The execution: The first paratrooper drops from the lead C-130 as it passes over Juliet Drop Zone.

country citizens. U.S. European Command had determined that a NEO was likely and directed SETAF to begin preparations to remove the noncombatants safely and, if possible, without the use of force.

Tapped for the job were more than 300 American paratroopers from Headquarters and HQs. Company and companies A and B of the 1st Battal-

ion, 508th Infantry Regiment, which is organized and equipped as an airborne battalion combat team and referred to as 1-508th ABCT, based at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza. A platoon from SETAF's 13th Military Police Co. also took part, as did members from the 22nd Area Support Group. Non-SETAF players included aviation soldiers from the Germany-based V Corps and Army Reserve elements from the 443rd Civil Affairs Bn., from Warwick, R.I., and the 346th Psychological Operations Co., 15th PSYOP Bn., from Columbus, Ohio. The Italian army contributed

members of the Folgore Brigade's 187th Parachute Regt.

Helicopter support was provided by UH-60 Black Hawks and CH-47 Chinooks from the Germany-based 12th Aviation Regt., and Italian search-

The exercise's initial objective was Juliet Drop Zone, a vast expanse of grassland at the foot of the Dolomite Mountains.

and-rescue helicopters and gunships. Four U.S. Air Force F-16 fighters from the 31st Fighter Wing flying out of Aviano Air Base, Italy, provided top cover and on-call close air support. The 12 Air Force C-130s from which the paratroopers and their equipment dropped — divided between the 37th Airlift Squadron from Ramstein Air Base, Germany, and the 2nd Airlift Sqdn. from Pope Air Force Base, N.C. — also staged out of Aviano.

The exercise's initial objective was Juliet Drop Zone, a vast expanse of grassland at the foot of the Dolomite Mountains about a two-hour drive northeast of Vicenza. Renamed LZ Aluminum for the exercise, it was the site of the heavy-equipment drop that landed Humvees and other vehicles. After that came the 426 American and

Italian paratroopers, dropping from nine C-130s.

Though rain had moved through the area earlier in the day, the jump took place in conditions that one of the participants, PFC Peter King of Co. B, 1-508th ABCT, called "excellent."

"It's a warm day, with no wind," he said, "really a perfect day to jump. And it's a great start to the exercise. Since our battalion specializes in NEO operations and airfield seizures, it's essential that we practice the entire process if we're to maintain our real-

(Right) A member of the 1-508th ABCT leans from an aircraft mock-up while practicing aircraft-exit procedures during the prejump training in Vicenza.

(Below) MG Paul T. Mikolashek (with arms folded) studies a map during the pre-exercise "rock drill" at Caserma Ederle.



A New Player

THE presence of Slovene army observers at Exercise Veneto Rescue and the inclusion of a Slovene site in the exercise scenario marked a new level of cooperation between the United States and the former Yugoslav republic, according to senior Army leaders and the U.S. ambassador to Slovenia, Nancy Ely-Raphel.

"I think it's very important for our military and the Slovene military to be able to work together and share experiences," she said. "We never know when there might be a regional emergency that would require us to work together, and I think any such cooperation will be much easier because we've learned to know and work with each other during joint exercises."



Ambassador Nancy Ely-Raphel and Slovene military observers listen to a Veneto Rescue briefing.

positive about it. It's another indication of their enthusiasm for, and interest in, the NATO partnership."

"We're very pleased at the cooperation and support the Slovenes have offered," added outgoing SETAF commander MG Paul T. Mikolashek.

"A cross-border exercise like this is very complex and requires extensive planning and cooperation, and the Slovenes have been very professional and very helpful," Mikolashek said. "We're eager to expand the relationship we have with them, and to take advantage of some of their training sites. They've been great to work with, and we hope to do more with them in the future." — *Steve Harding*

Ely-Raphel said senior Slovene leaders saw their country's participation in Veneto Rescue as a very positive development.

"There has been a tremendous amount of cooperation among Slovenia, the United States and other NATO member states, and the Slovenes are very

world capability to protect innocent lives."

Once on the ground the soldiers fanned out to secure the drop zone, establishing fighting positions in nearby treelines. Looking on with members of his staff, SETAF commander Mikolashek had a chance to reflect on the soldiers' skills and their unit's mission.

"The 1-508th is ideally suited to this kind of operation," he said. "These soldiers are tough, capable, well-trained and motivated. The battalion has often undertaken vital, real-world missions on short notice, and these soldiers really put tremendous effort into tough and realistic training like this."

That training continued nonstop once the drop zone was secured. Boarding waiting helicopters, the paratroopers moved to outlying sites near the cities of Maniago and Romans in Italy and Pocek in Slovenia to

secure and prepare for evacuation the 100 American and 30 Italian role-players acting as "noncombatants."

Much of the action took place at an Italian army facility in Osoppo, a town about 30 miles north of DZ Juliet. Transformed for the exercise into the site of the American embassy, the facility was the scene of clashes between hostile but unarmed "civilian demonstrators" and the soldiers attempting to identify, process and evacuate the imperiled "American citizens."

Brought in from the drop zone early in the afternoon by UH-60s, paratroopers from Co. A, 1-508th ABCT, secured the fenced compound's gates, established covering machine-gun positions and formed up to meet the advance of

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civilian-clothed soldiers portraying the demonstrators. Hurling insults and waving "Yankee Go Home" placards, the latter attempted to goad the members of the evacuation force into breaking ranks and tried to grab M-16s and other equipment from distracted soldiers. Wild melees erupted in the fading evening light as the demonstrators tried to push through the cordon of paratroopers manning the main gate. Other soldiers raced in pursuit of intruders who'd managed to jump the compound's chain-link fence.

One of the "demonstrators," 1LT Marc Daniels, said the role-players' task was to cause "disruption and panic" among the paratroopers trying to secure the compound.

"We're here to shake their confidence, to cause their line to break down," Daniels said. "We want to show them what they might actually have to face sometime, and help reinforce what they've been taught about dealing effectively with unarmed but hostile mobs. Learning to handle us means they'll be better able to deal with the real thing."

Amid the turmoil paratroopers attempted to collect the "evacuees" from outside the gates and move them to safety within the embassy compound. Once through the gauntlet of



Paratroopers of the 1-508th ABCT descend upon Juliet Drop Zone. More than 400 American and Italian soldiers took part in the jump.



Soldiers of Co. A, 1-508th ABCT, prepare to defend the Osoppo “embassy complex” from placard-wielding “demonstrators” bent on obstructing the evacuation.



Chanting anti-American slogans the “demonstrators” rush the gate, attempting to both break into the compound and grab the weapons of unwary or careless soldiers.

boisterous demonstrators, the evacuees — actually Vicenza-based soldiers, family members and Italian military personnel — were quickly but thoroughly interviewed by military police and medical and civil-affairs soldiers to establish their identities and need for evacuation. Those meeting the evacuation criteria were tagged, fed and moved to a holding area to await the transportation.

That transportation — a CH-47 Chinook — wasn’t due in until well after dark, so many of the soldiers involved in the evacuation took their first break in what had already been a

very long day.

Speaking during a hurried dinner of MREs beside one of the embassy compound’s sandbagged bunkers, SGT Bruce L. Newpher of Co. A said the men of his squad had been on the move almost continually.

“It’s been busy, but it’s been great training,” Newpher added. “This kind of exercise helps prepare us for what might happen during a real-world operation. It gives us a better idea of what we might be up against, and how to deal with whatever comes.”

And learning to deal with the uncertainties of noncombat operations is one of the most important things soldiers learn during exercises like Veneto Rescue, said 1-508th ABCT CSM Mark Nielsen.

“I think it has more to do with attitude than with soldier skills,” he said. “Paratroopers tend to be aggressive when they first hit the ground, which is great in wartime but not really the best attitude to bring to a NEO operation. So exercises like this give them the opportunity to polish their

skills while at the same time learning to ‘wind down’ a little in order to deal effectively with displaced civilians and other bystanders.

“These soldiers know that the battalion has undertaken real noncombatant evacuations in the past, and that it will most probably be called on to do it again,” Nielsen added. “So they know how important this type of training is and they really pay attention. They know that getting the civilians out safely is the primary goal.”



Soldiers subdue a “demonstrator” who had attempted to rush through the front gate of the embassy compound.

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For the paratroopers at the embassy compound, that goal was reached just after midnight. A CH-47 circled the compound once, then landed in an open area about 50 meters from the main “embassy” building. Shepherded by paratroopers, the evacuees raced up the Chinook’s ramp and settled into their seats.

Within minutes of landing the Chinook was airborne again, bound for LZ Aluminum. There the evacuees joined groups brought in from the other collection points. All of the “civilians” underwent a further selection process, with some destined to be flown out of Anglia aboard C-130s bound for a “U.S.-friendly destination” and others to be bused to a nearby “safe haven.”

As Exercise Veneto Rescue wound down following the extraction of the evacuees, troops and aircraft began



Once secured and processed the “evacuees,” in reality U.S. and Italian soldiers and family members, are moved to a holding area to await evacuation by helicopter.

returning to their home stations. For the paratroopers of the 1-508th ABCT, the return to Vicenza meant gearing up for another mass drop, this one to mark the inactivation of the SETAF Inf. Bde. and the activation in its place of the 173rd Abn. Bde [see accompanying article].

For SETAF’s outgoing commander, the successful conclusion of Veneto Rescue offered the opportunity to reflect both on the exercise and the soldiers who conducted it.

“This was a very complex and challenging operation,” Mikolashek said. “It involved three countries, dozens of aircraft and several hundred troops. The coordination and cooperation among the Army, the Air Force, the Italians and the Slovenes was just tremendous. It all came together very well, and I could not be prouder of these soldiers.” □



A CH-47 lifts off from the embassy compound after dropping 1-508th ABCT soldiers. The same aircraft will return after dark to embark the evacuees and take them to LZ Aluminum, where they will be put aboard buses and C-130s for onward movement.